

Utah: Saddle up for a ride

By Lindsay Sutton

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The pioneer settler looked down at the huge canyon before him with its thousand-foot cliffs, weirdly-shaped pinnacles and gigantic rock mazes.

He seemed lost for words, but then turned and said: "Hell of a place to lose a cow!" His name was Ebenezer Bryce and he never did lose any cattle as he and his family toughed it out and set up their farmstead in this far-from-hospitable land.

Today, 150 years on, the memorable comment of this firstwave settler in America's midwest state of Utah lives on.

They even named this geological wonder after him. Today, millions of visitors follow in his footsteps to Bryce Canyon.

You can walk, ride on horseback, take a coach or even fly over the near 20-mile long canyon of sandstone skyscrapers in a helicopter - and it's worth every penny, whatever way you choose.

It's little surprise to learn that Highway 12, a route that links up southern Utah's spectacular array of national and state parks, is an "All-American Highway" which means it's one of the most scenic routes in the United States.

Get on the trail of Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid and immerse yourself in the history of these Robin Hoods of the West.

Nobody in Utah will badmouth old Butch, who was seen as hitting only the rich institutions, while helping "ord'nary folk" whenever he could. As for the Sundance Kid, his
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institutions, while helping "ordinary folk" whenever he could. As for the Sundance Kid, his name lives on at Sundance Resort, an environmentally-friendly bolthole set up by the film's star Robert Redford.

The legend is sometimes there himself, keeping an eye on the 5,000 acres of protected wilderness that Redford bought nearly 40 years ago, with a view to nurturing a community committed to the balance of art, nature and fun.

The resort's setting is sublime, part-way up the 12,000-foot Mount Timpanogos, and just an hour's drive from the airport at Utah's capital, Salt Lake City.

It's always been a retreat of sorts, from the days when the Ute Indians went up the Sundance Canyon to escape the summer heat. Now it also acts as HQ for the Sundance Institute, set up to encourage independent filmmakers.

He doesn't dwell on it, but Redford's ex-wife was a Mormon from just down the road. We may as well deal with the questions most people ask about this state: "Do they practise polygamy? And can you get a drink?" Our experience showed that visitors are made welcome by all, from the bigger cities right through to the outlying rural areas. Nowhere did we meet any attempt to gain converts.

That is left to young men on their missions abroad.

There is talk that some men do still practise polygamy, though it's not something discussed openly. No one seems prickly or over-sensitive about the issue, with one beer advert even reading: "Polygamy Porter - Why have just one?" You can get a drink in hotels and restaurants, and even in the one where you couldn't - the exquisite Roof Restaurant in the Joseph Smith Centre next to the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City - it was no big deal. The food, ambience and superb views of the city and mountains are sufficiently intoxicating.

You have to admire the pioneer spirit that saw the original Mormons push their handcarts 1,300 miles across America to their Promised Land back in the mid-19th Century. Their tenacity also made the Salt Lake desert bloom with hard work, faith and their irrigation systems.

And whether you're religious or not, go to see and hear the world-famous Tabernacle Choir in Salt Lake City. It's a real "hairs on the back of your neck standing up" experience.

For Jurassic Park enthusiasts, Carbon County around the town of Price is a must - besides the fabulous museum in town, there is a quarry just outside which has 15,000 pre-historic bones that have come out of one three-metre wide strata of rock, with another 12,000 or so still to be unearthed. Experts are on hand to guide you round the site, whose rocks date back to 35 million years ago when dinosaurs roamed the land.

Switching tracks, literally, you can ascend 9,000ft in a 4x4 on to the vast high plains of the Tavaputs Plateau above Price for another great experience. This is provided by Butch and Jeannie Jensen, who offer the chance to live with them on their Tavaputs Ranch.

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and Jeannie Jensen, who offer the chance to live with them on their Tavaputs Ranch, high above Desperation Canyon where our old friend Butch Cassidy hung out. The hairraising drive up the switchback road is something else. See the ancient Native American food stores high up on precarious cliffs, or just relax and eat the fine food on offer. A highlight was racing alongside a herd of elk.

Almost full circle, we made for the All-American Highway 12, always getting a warm welcome, from the modest motel in little Hanksville to the comfortable B&B of the Torrey Schoolhouse.

Then there is the Zion Mountain Resort, where you can sleep in a tepee and live like a Navajo Indian. Equally fascinating is the Anasazi State Park Museum, a site where farmers lived back in the 12th Century.

The mulberry pie we had at the aptly-named pioneer settlement of Fruita is a treasured memory, as is the organic cooking at Hell's Backbone Restaurant in Boulder. The walk in Capitol Reef Country, near Torrey, was yet another aweinspiring experience.

To finish off in the sophisticated and liberal mountain resort of Park City, where the 2002 Winter Olympics were held, shows the diversity available. The three world-class ski resorts there are linked by free transport and have everything on offer - in winter and summer alike. The eating is good too, especially at Zoom Restaurant, owned by Robert Redford.

The kid gets everywhere....

What's the deal?

Flights on BMI (www.flybmi.com (<http://www.flybmi.com/>)) from London to Salt Lake City from £432.

Car hire costs £153 a week.

Go to www.avis.co.uk Sundance Resort from £150 per room per night, go to www.sundanceresort.com (<http://www.sundanceresort.com/>) Tavaputs Plateau Ranch costs £117 per day (incl. all meals & activities). Go to www.tavaputsranch.com Torrey Schoolhouse: £73 - [www.torreyschoolhouse](http://www.torreyschoolhouse.com) (<http://www.torreyschoolhouse/>) Ruby's Inn, Bryce Canyon: £89.50 - www.rubysinn.com (<http://www.rubysinn.com/>) More info: www.utah.travel and www.visitsaltlake.com (<http://www.visitsaltlake.com/>)

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